

3 Things to Never Forget When Mixing Audio In a Worship Environment

Posted on Mar 22, 2010

We've all been to concerts where the speakers were stacked from floor to ceiling. The band was rocking, we were screaming the songs we knew so well at the top of our lungs, and the venue was pushing 110 dB at the back doors.



Doesn't happen at church though, right?

It would be great if we could mix that way at a standard church service, but most often that isn't the case. Transitioning from your standard rock concert environment to a more worshipful one can be difficult not only for many church goers, but also for us sound engineers.

The art of mixing live sound fills many books. And like any other art form, it is quite subjective. What sounds good to one person might not to another. Throw everyone's different musical tastes and backgrounds into the mix (no pun intended), and it seems almost impossible to create a mix in a worship environment that would please everyone.

With this in mind, however, there are a few general principles in mixing audio in any worship environment that I've found help bring a good balance.

1. Always Make Sure the Vocals are Understood



This is the most important principle in any worship environment.

The congregation will be lost unless they can hear and understand what the worship leader is singing. As the audio engineer this is sometimes hard to remember. We hear the

song a million times during the week and rehearsals. By the time service comes around we could sing the song in our sleep.

It is very tempting to crank the guitars up, sit back, and sing along, not realizing that most of the congregation has heard the song maybe twice and barely knows the lyrics, let alone the melody.

Mix as if you didn't know the words.

2. Do Not 'Set it and Forget it'



A mix should be a living, breathing thing.

Don't just set a few faders, make sure that no ones clipping, and go grab some coffee. During the entire worship service listen for interesting instrumentations and areas that could be enhanced dynamically. Professional recordings are full of automation, constantly changing individual track volumes to delicately balance the overall mix.

Live sound is no different.

The obvious example is turning up the guitar during a solo. (Just make sure you turn it back down afterwards.) Another idea is changing up the instrumentation in an intimate worship song. During one verse bring the piano up and the acoustic guitar down.

Then, when the second verse is coming up, switch it up. Bring the acoustic guitar up as the main instrument and use the piano more as a filler instrument. These aren't drastic volume changes, just smooth and gradual. You don't want the congregation to notice the change, all they know is that it sounds good.

3. Know your Audience



We've all gotten it: Someone a little bit "older" stops by the sound booth and asks, "Can you turn it down?" Or even "How many decibels you running? Seems a bit loud."

It's funny. During the same service I've had someone tell me it was too loud and someone tell me they wished it were louder. That's when I realized I'm never going to make everyone happy with the SPLs. So what to do?

First, ask your pastor what they want. Do they want a loud, in your face volume level or a more conservative approach? My instructions were to run 92 dB at the soundboard in the back of the auditorium. If people want it louder they can sit toward the front. If people prefer a quieter worship experience, they can sit farther back or toward the sides.

Second, don't get offended if someone isn't happy with the volume level. Everyone hears things differently. Some people are more sensitive to certain frequencies than others. If someone complains, politely direct them to a quieter or louder section of the auditorium. Some churches even provide earplugs free of charge.

Mixing audio in a church is a difficult job. As an artist, it is easy to get offended when someone criticizes our work. We just have to remember our ultimate goal, creating a space free of distractions where people can worship and experience God.

And if that means turning it down a few dB, then so be it.